Ransomed Cubans' Invasion Story Reveals Impression U. S. Had Role

By Jim Becker and Robert Berrellez

MIAMI, Dec. 29 (AP)—It was March, 1961. A call to arms had rung through Florida's Cuban exile community, and men were gathering.

They were leaving their jobs and families to start a task which led, for 1113 of them, to 20 months in prison that would end this week in a 53-million-dollar human barter.

Recruiting had started the year before. Training had begun informally in some makeshift camps and with professional supervision in others scattered throughout Florida.

What was the American role in the recruiting and training?

Felix Santiesteban, 25, said: "Americans had nothing to do officially with our recruiting or training."

Impression Given

But other prisoners, who asked that their names be withheld, said there were some Cuban recruiters who gave at least the impression they were representing the United States, and particularly the Central Intelligence Agency.

They said an incentive to recruiting was the line that with the United States behind it, the invasion could not fail.

"I never talked to any Americans," said Raoul Arango. "There were many Cuban groups in Florida talking about invasion, and I joined this one because it was the largest, and seemed to have the best chance of success."

So in the spring of 1961, when thousands had fled Fidel Castro's regime to Florida, men were converging on the Opa-Locka airport, an abandoned Navy and Marine base near Miami, in trucks and private cars. Unmarked American planes waited in the dark.

"We flew straight to Trax, an airfield high in the mountains of Guatemala," said Rene Leyva, 49.

Professional soldiers, many of them Americans, whipped the men into shape.

"I practiced parachute jumps with Americans," said Arango. "I made five practice jumps. I didn't ask them what they were doing there."

"I cannot say if the Americans were on active duty, or officially representing their government," said Ulises Carbo, 37.

"At the same time, men with administrative skills were organizing the so-called 'Cuban Revolutionary Council' and 'Operation 40,' the code name for a new government for Cuba.

The political chief of the expeditionary force was Manuel Artime, one of the original anti-Batista revolutionaries who broke with Castro later on the question of communism.

Even today, Artime will not talk about the training, or stories that groups of various political hues struggled for control of the invasion.

Dissension or no, the invasion went forward, and few of the men in it were aware of any.

"I came down from the mountains on April 13," said Leyva's son, Eduardo, 17. "We were flown from Trax to Retalhuleu, the air base in Guatemala, and from there to Puerto Cabeza in Nicaragua.

"We arrived at night and moved in covered trucks in a convoy to the docks. We spent the night and most of the next day there.

"I stayed behind at an airfield in Nicaragua to help tend the bombers and equipment," the elder Leyva said. "We had B-26 bombers."

"Nothing much happened on the way to Cuba," young Leyva recalled. "We were escorted most of the way by U. S. destroyers. We expected them to go into action but they didn't."

(U. S. military authorities declined, both then and now, to say whether any American warships or planes aided in the invasion effort.)

Like Bad Movie

"I saw one plane," said Mario Santiago, April 20. "It was ours. It went over on the 15th, on the way to bomb an air base in Cuba."

The men went into boats to go ashore.

"From the moment of landing I lost all physical sensation," said young Leyva. "It seemed like I was watching a bad movie. Their men came screaming 'Patria o Muerte' ('Fatherland or death') and then they fell dead. They kept coming in waves."

"They were in closed ranks, in the most amazing manner," Carbo said. "They finally broke under fire, but scores were killed."

Back at the armada, things were going wrong.

"After the first boatload of troops got off, the unloading equipment jammed," said Humberto Sanchez, 28, an infantryman who was waiting to get ashore.

"We thought the first B-26 heading for us that dawn was friendly," Sanchez said. "The plane waggled its wings, then roared in and strafed and bombed us. One of our anti-aircraft batteries jammed.

"Rockets and bombs set the Houston on fire. The skipper ran her aground. The troops jumped off, but into deep water. Men were drowned and others were killed by the strafing."

Where was American air cover? Was it promised?

A group of Cuban B-26 pilots now in Miami insist that it was. They said they would not let their names be used for fear of reprisal from other Cubans or U. S. authorities.

"Without fighter cover, we could not make supply drops and strafing runs in the B-26s we had," a pilot said.

"All of them disappeared."

The loss of the supplies was to prove vital, but at first things went well on shore.

"Castro must have suffered 4000 casualties in those first few hours," said Carbo. "We captured an important highway leading into the beach and a small airport."

(In Havana that morning, thousands of Castro's militia were pouring east toward the Bay of Pigs. These troops had been rushed a week earlier in the other direction to answer a false invasion rumor. The big Anti-Castro underground, which had prepared to blow up bridges and tunnels between Havana and the invasion area, had been wiped out by mass arrests April 15 when invasion planes attacked without previous warning to the underground.)

On Their Own

By nightfall Castro's reinforcements had reached the battle area and the tide began to turn. Then the invaders' supplies ran low.

From then on it was long, weary months in prison . . . months of poor food, uncertainty of the future and sometimes inhuman treatment. At last, Castro agreed to let them go.

The elder Leyva flew from Paterson, N. J., to Florida to meet his son.

"I want to complete my education," said the boy. "I never want to be in uniform again."

Luis Entrialgo had a different notion: "I'm ready to go back tomorrow."